PLANTS AS SITE INDICATORS

(especially cemetery sites)

Selected comments on plant indicators on historic sites in general and cemeteries in particular, from HISTARCH internet discussion list, March 10, 2001:

From Ben Ford:

I am interested in finding references regarding the use of plants as clues for site identification.

Are there certain kinds of plants that tend to colonize structure sites?

What sorts of domesticates and exotics were most common around homes at various times (e.g. boxelder, perry winkle, English ivy)?

Once the types of plants to look for have been named, is there a particularly good book to help with identifying these species in the field?

From Christopher P. Murphy:

Here in the southeastern U.S. (I'm in Augusta, GA), it is certainly true that certain plants are associated with residential structures. A few years back I was investigating a rural area near Augusta where former house sites (some of the houses were completely gone, others only survived as collapsing ruins) could often be detected about this time of the year by the blooming of the jonquils (a.k.a. daffodils) which were apparently common yard flowers in the 19th and 20th centuries. Even after the structures have been gone for years, the flowers still continue to come up and mark the spot. Also in my area, perriwinkle (Vinca minor?) is known as "cemetery vine" due to its frequent association with graveyards (especially small rural ones).

Last year I attended a Southern Garden Heritage conference where some of the speakers discussed the botanical fads of the past century or two and called attention to the fact that long lived plants can sometimes remain for considerable lengths of time after the garden is gone to seed and lost its original plan. I remember that camelias and roses were mentioned in that context.

From Margo Davis:

The following report has a discussion about looking for plants to help locate and orientate archaeological sites. It includes lilacs, roses, day lilies, morning glories, hydrangeas, periwinkle & "front yard trees" like sugar maples near house foundations, and thistles, burdock and nettles over barnyards & dumps. It also discusses tree blazes and wooden property markers. I believe it is available from the Office of the Vermont State Archaeologist.

1994 Stonewalls & Cellarholes: A Guide for Landowners on Historic Features and Landscapes in Vermont's Forests. Vermont Forest Stewardship Program, Report #194-VGA

From: Daniel H. Weiskotten:

One of the things that I've noticed with cemeteries in the northeast is myrtle (vinca, perrywinkle, ...) which grows even if the cemetery was taken over by forest long ago. It is wonderful

to stumble across a country cemetery in the midst of a mature forest with 3 foot diameter maples and still find a lush patch of green myrtle.

Another "indicator plant" that I discovered to be in cemeteries, and which seems also to be planted, is thyme. There is some symbolism For years I thought the wonderful aroma was a lichen growing on the stones until I met a woman who would go to the cemetery near her house and pull it from the grass for use in her kitchen. Many of the cemeteries I have studied had thyme growing over the entire area, having spread unchecked for over a century. It did best in mowed cemeteries but I found it still growing in weedy plots as well as wooded areas. Of course I discovered this interesting tidbit at the very end of my survey of over 60 cemeteries.

From James L Murphy:

Late 19th-mid 20th C. rural house sites in southeastern Ohio are often marked by the following:

Daylily (Hemerocallis)
Jonquil (single and double)
Narcissus
Grape Hyacinth
Myrtle/Periwinkle
Rose
Iris

Occasionally, I have noticed

Catnip
Japanese Quince
Barberry
Forsythia
Japonica
Lilac

Just today I was working at a house site where several clumps of Snowdrop (Galanthus) have persisted behind the house foundations.

I have seen one site engulfed in Japanese Knotweed, a site so isolated and removed from any stream that I felt confident that this introduced weed had been deliberately planted as an ornamental. But it would be foolhardy to use this introduced weed as a means of trying to locate historic sites.

As in Georgia, the sighting of periwinkle/myrtle invariably means a house or cemetery. I have seen only one occurrence that I could not related to an historic site.

Box elder and Ailanthus are so ubiquitous in this area that I'd be hard put to identify an occurrence as due to artificial planting.

The problem is that some of these ornamental plants are hardier than others. I can't believe that the scarcity of tulips at such sites, for example, means that they weren't popular while the houses were occupied. They just don't survive as well on their own.

From Larry Buhr :

On the northern edge of the Great Plains in Western Canada, these seem to be good indicators of past historic occupation, especially with farm sites:

Caragana hedges (C. arborescens)
Lilacs
Box Elder (aka 'Manitoba Maple' in this region)
Conifers of any type, outside of native growing areas

The rather severe weather fluctuations in this region don't seem to allow many other domesticated perennials to survive without human care, although some examples such as rhubarb, hardier rose and strawberry/raspberry varieties, and a variety of shrubs (e.g. cotoneaster) may last for a considerable time on their own.